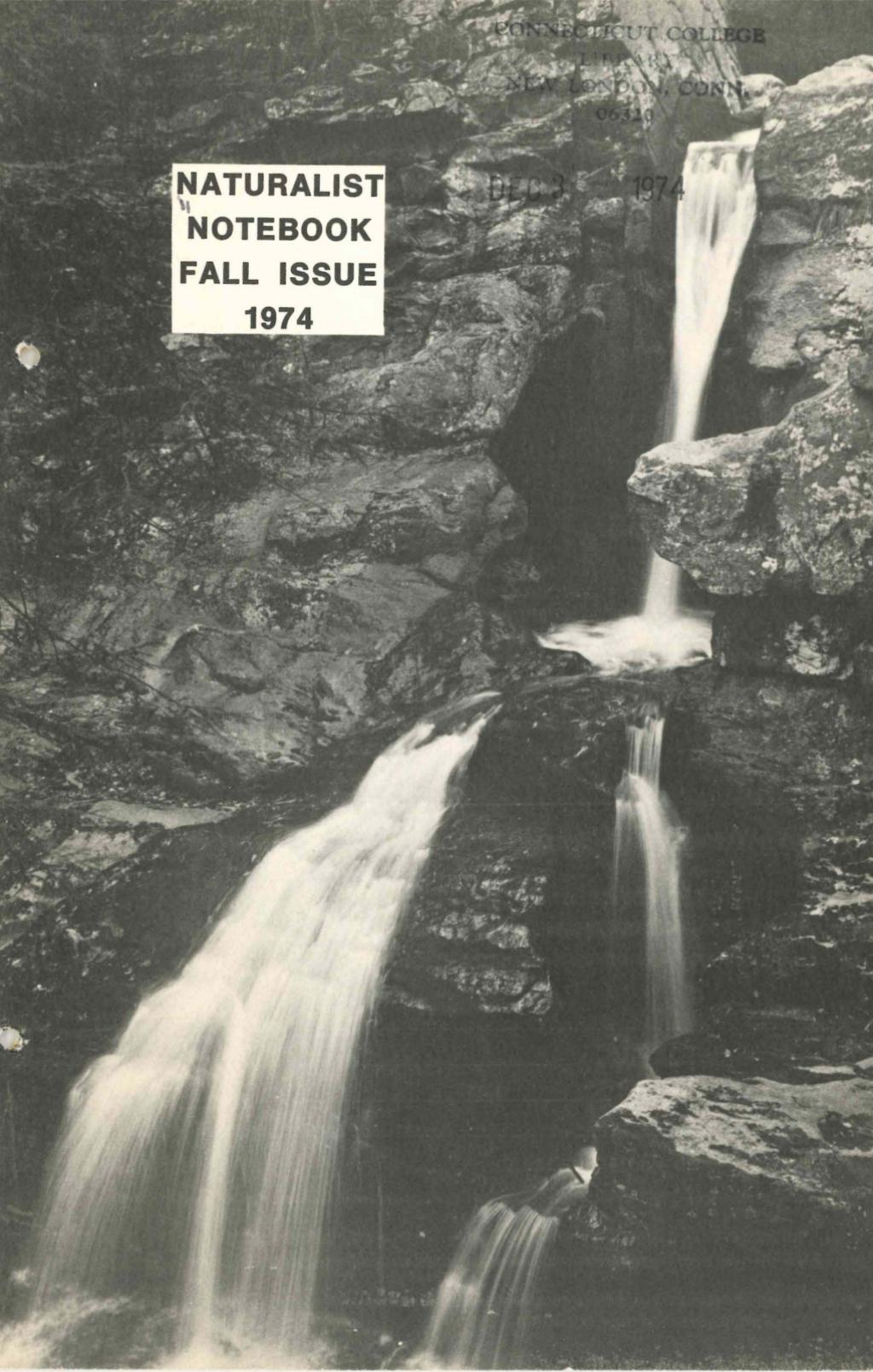


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**NATURALIST  
NOTEBOOK  
FALL ISSUE  
1974**

DEC 9 1974





# NATURALIST NOTEBOOK

FALL 1974

seeking a  
quality environment  
through education

## FRONT COVER:

Photo by *Seth Goltzer*. Kent Falls tumbling down through the fallen leaves of autumn . . . next month through the ice of winter.

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*Editor:* John F. Gardner

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# COMMENTARY....

## Gray Squirrel



As we sit around the Thanksgiving table, let us not forget to give thanks for the natural wonders that we have about us. Thanks for fallen leaves, milkweed seeds floating on the wind, rushing water along stream banks, chickadees at the feeder. For ducks flying overhead, abandoned hornets nest, clattering squirrels, deer eating windfallen apples in the orchard. For crows flocking in the treeline, Orion in the sky, blue jays stuffing themselves with sunflower seed. For maple keys scattered all about, oriole nests hanging in plain sight against bare branches, and hoarfrost fringing everything it touches.

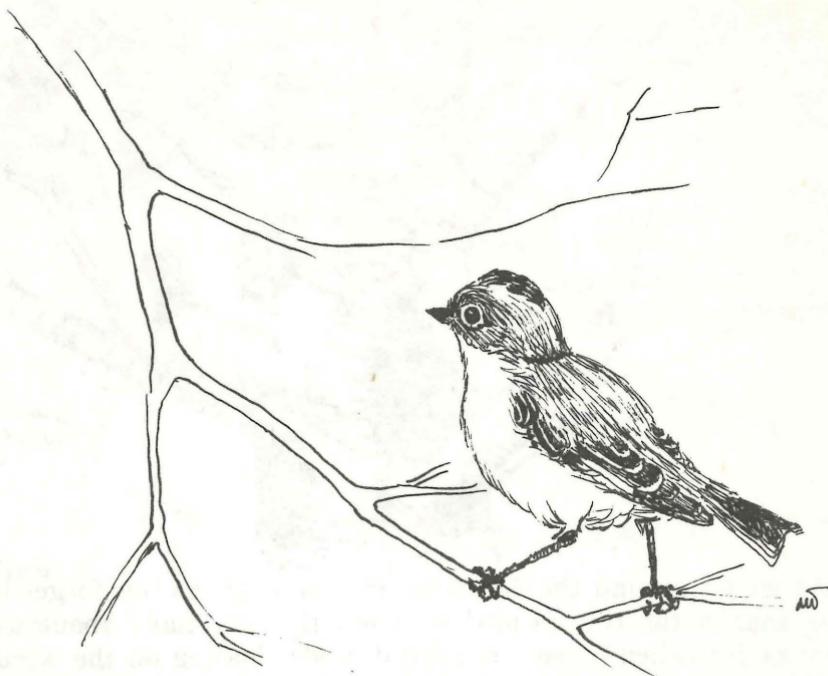
Give thanks for the sights and sounds of nature. For the common things we have learned to pick out of the vast pattern of autumn. For the things of nature which we were taught to love as children.

Then ask: Who will teach today's child of these things? Who will preserve these things for tomorrow? Who will make it possible for tomorrow's child to give thanks for the simple wonders of nature that abound about him....? Who will be the steward of nature's gifts and bounty. Who will be the teacher?

Unless you answer—I will—what hope is left . . . what thanks to give.

# NOVEMBER

## THE MONTH OF KINGLETS



It is during the late fall, certainly by November, that one can see some of our smallest birds, in fact the smallest birds to be found in the East with the exception of the hummingbird. These birds are called kinglets. There are two species to be found, the ruby-crowned kinglet and the golden-crowned kinglet. The ruby crown gets the official title of second smallest bird in the east since the golden-crown is just slightly larger. Both birds can be easily found in November, ruby-crowns more common in brushy habitat near water and golden-crowns in woods, especially conifers.

The two are easy to separate.

The golden-crowned kinglet is well named. The top of his head bears a striking patch of yellow. On both sides of the yellow are dark stripes which are easily visible. The ruby-crowned kinglet lacks both of these marks. Instead it has a white eyering which gives the bird a wide-eyed stare.

Both the ruby and golden-crown kinglet males also have a hidden color on the head that is only exposed during courtship or anger. On the ruby-crown it is a patch of scarlet feathers that are spectacular to see when the bird spreads the gray feathers off them. On the golden-crown there is a patch of brilliant orange feathers that



are under the yellow crown. Rarely seen by people, it creates a stunning effect when witnessed.

Both kinglets remain in the winter although most ruby-crowns will head a little further south. Golden-crowns will even remain in northern New England. When one sees these tiny-billed birds that obviously cannot eat bird seed, one wonders how they can survive a New England winter. They spend their time searching the trees for insect eggs and larvae which are their staple in winter. Rarely one may briefly visit a suet feeder.

The voices of these two birds are also very different. The golden-crown's song consists of a series of three very high pitched notes

easily heard in a still woodland in winter. The ruby-crown on the other hand confines his winter sound to a single harsh buzz, but come spring bursts into a lovely warbling song that may last 8 or more seconds—quite a performance from such a small bird.

Watch for a tiny bird this month. If its eye stares at you it's a ruby-crowned kinglet, or as it is called in Europe, a firecrest. If the head is obviously striped it is the golden-crowned kinglet or goldcrest in Europe. Note their size and think about their ability to withstand the winter. They are indeed hardy birds.

*by R. Dewire*

# NATURE'S WAYS

A friend who recently was watching woolly bear caterpillars cross an asphalt road remarked:

"You know, those little rascals are going somewhere!"

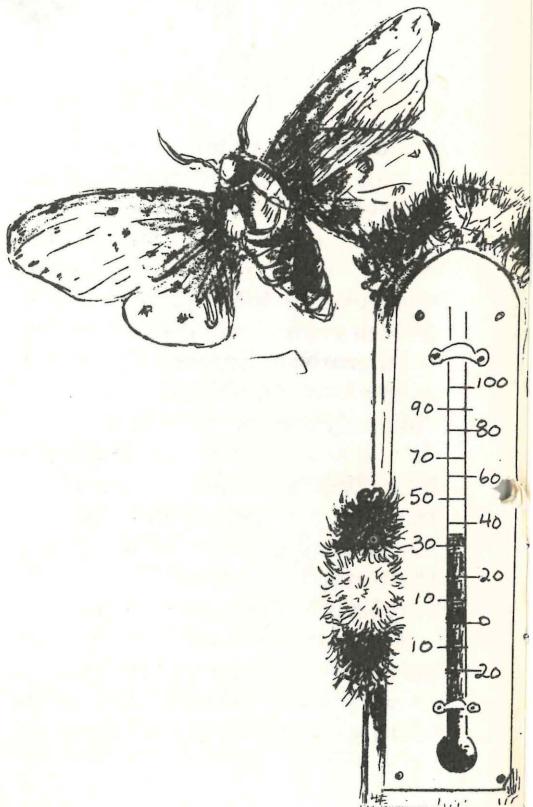
Perhaps they scurry in modest retreat, to escape ridicule for having been named after a Queen's undergarments.

In any event, the hustle and determination of the woolly bear "to get somewhere" seems even more remarkable than the legends concerning their supposed ability to predict winter weather through the distribution of black and brown on their fuzzy bodies. The woolly bear shuffles across a sunlit road in a straight line and at top speed. It obviously has an appointment and probably got a late start. There is no indecisiveness that one associates with the many caterpillars that lift their heads and feel in all directions before making the next move.

The woolly bear either is a black caterpillar with a brown saddle, or a brown caterpillar with two black ends. From year to year, and indeed from caterpillar to caterpillar, the number of center segments that bear brown "wool" varies. Most of us cannot remember whether a long band of brown means a long or short, mild or frigid winter. But, for obscure reasons, the prominence of the brown band has been accepted by many as a weather prognostication.

The reason the woolly bear hurries more than most caterpillars that meet the eye is because he does have a date—a rendezvous with winter. His life differs from that of most moths and butterflies. He will spend the winter as a caterpillar instead of housing himself in a snug cocoon. The woolly bear finds a sheltered spot, curls into a ball and sleeps until spring.

Next April, he will crawl out of his shelter, munch upon greenery



and then spin a cocoon. The cocoon is made of silk, which the caterpillar excludes, and of the "hairs" on the body. It is a felt-like capsule.

From the cocoon will emerge a moth, known as the Isabella tiger moth. If one knows a little about natural history, he can predict that any moth named "Isabella" or "isabelline" will more than likely be a dingy, tawny yellow. Meanwhile, the Isabella tiger moth is a night flyer that spends its life in grassy meadows, readying another batch of woolly bear caterpillars.

Anyone who has read much desert natural history, particularly about the deserts of the Middle East, often encounters the word "isabelline" applied to such creators as the Isabelline lark. These

birds and animals match the color of sand. Their name comes from Queen Isabella of Austria who manufactured the original isabelline color in rather interesting manner.

Isabella, who was a daughter of Philip II, misplaced her confidence in her army. When the army laid seige to the city of Ostend in 1601, Queen Isabella vowed that until the city fell, she would not change her undergarments. The inevitable happened. There was the usual hang-up in logistics, bungling of command and so forth. The seige lasted three years—and Queen Isabella kept her vow. Thus, dingy yellow became isabelline.

by Wayne Hanley  
Mass. Audubon

## **Woolly Bear Caterpillar Indicates Bad Winter**

Reports have been coming in from park rangers who say that from their observations the Region is in for a severe winter.

"Natural signs observed in the field point to a nasty winter," said one ranger in his monthly report for November.

His report continued:

"Butterflies began flocking early and migrating early.

"There are a lot of spiders, black bugs and worms crawling about.

"Blackberry blooms were especially heavy.

"Squirrels are building nests low in trees.

"We had foggy days in September.

"Hickory nuts have a heavy shell.

"Muskrats lodges are large.

"Birds are eating up all the wild berries early.

"Squirrels and rabbits have heavy fur.

"Ant hills are high."

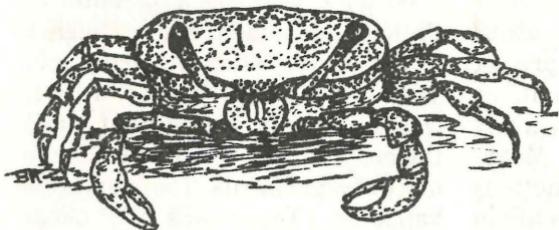
The observations were made at four large parks, and rangers said the results, taken over the years, are indicative of a bad winter.

The Park Ranger said that if the previous warnings are not convincing enough, "the woolly bear caterpillar is the clincher.

"There are a lot of them; they have a thick coat, and they started creeping and crawling before the first frost.

"They have more black than brown."

# *Fiddler On The Marsh*



One of the most lovely times of year to visit a tidal marsh is during the fall. Along the upper edge of the marsh the deep yellow of the seaside goldenrod vies for recognition among the beautiful white and purple fall asters. It is best to go when the tide is low so that it is possible to wander over the salt-marsh grasses. Patches of the delicate pale sea lavender can be found among the grass but most delightful of all is the brilliant ruby-red of the succulent glasswort. Another small splash of color will greet the marsh visitor who has the time and patience to sit very still for awhile. At first the many little holes around the clumps of grasses go unnoticed and then suddenly many small comic creatures cautiously appear. First the eyes on jointed stalks pop out of the holes. If there is no sight of danger, out comes a small animal, barely an inch long, waving a ridiculously large claw—the fiddler crab.

For a long time it was thought that the oversized claw of the males were used only for attracting the females during courtship displays, but now it is known that the males also use their large claw as a signaling device to establish their territory. Their territories are only a few inches of mud around the burrow, which can go as deep as three feet, but they are defended vigorously. If an intruder ventures onto forbidden territory the owner frantically waves his claw to frighten the unwanted visitor away. If this fails, the fiddler crab will fight the opponent and try to turn him on his back. Courtship is a trying affair for this would-be tidal musician. The hopeful male will stand at his burrow entrance for hours waving at passing females. Sometimes he waves for two or three days before he is successful in attracting a member of the opposite sex who generally seems very indifferent to all the waving hopefules.

The practical female, which is usually duller in color, has two claws of equal size and both are used for feeding. Only the smaller claw of the male is used to find food. It also cleans mud off of the large claw. Small

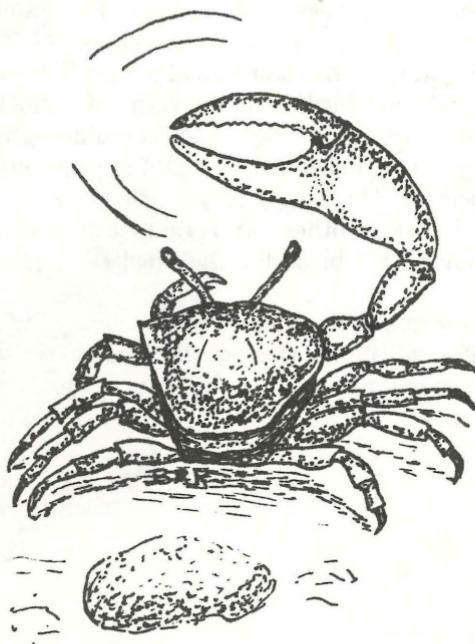
clumps of mud are carried to the mouth parts and then fine bristles sort out the eatable bits of decayed vegetable matter or tiny organisms. The rest is then discarded. During its hours of feeding the little fiddler crab must constantly be on the alert for predators. That is why the slightest movement will send them scurrying into their burrows. The purple marsh crab and many shore birds, especially herons, are the greatest threat to this little crustacean.

As the incoming tide encroaches on the marsh, each crab cuts out a disc of mud the exact size of his burrow entrance. This he carries on his back, holding it in place with his claw, until he enters his tunnel. The disc fits snugly into the opening and traps a bubble of air which the crab uses for breathing until the tide recedes again.

The comic little fiddler crab is not only delightful to watch but is an important member of this fragile community. Not only is he an important part of the food chain but his burrow helps to aerate the mud in much the same way as earthworms aerate a lawn. The nutrients, released in broken down form, in the fecal pellets contribute greatly to the economy of the marsh by making them available to other forms of life such as clams, mussels and oysters.

So if you are looking for some fall color with a touch of comedy visit a tidal marsh where the little fiddler crab dwells.

*by Barbara Kashanski*



# THE BIRD WITHOUT A FRIEND— THE STARLING

Birds are enjoyed by most people. Every year, thousands of people in Connecticut alone erect bird houses in the spring, plant bushes and other plants whose seeds or berries will be eaten by birds, and set up bird feeding stations for the winter all to attract and help birdlife.

There is one bird however that few if anyone tries to attract. When it shows up at a feeder it is scared away, and if it tries to nest in a bird house it is driven off. The bird is the starling, a rather handsome bird when viewed close-up (see illustrations on opposite page). The bird is not native to this country but was introduced from Europe by a well-meaning gentleman who initially set a flock of these birds free. It was his desire to have all the birds mentioned in Shakespeare's works brought to this country and established. There is little doubt that the starling is now established. They are very aggressive which was surely a plus in their favor as they drove native birds from nesting holes and took over feeding areas from others. The population spread rapidly and has now reached all of the continental U.S. In many areas flocks number in the hundreds of thousands and even millions. As a damager of grain crops they are greatly disliked in the midwest. Closer to home their noisy flocks quickly dominate a bird feeder (especially one that has suet) and this behavior makes them few friends. The habit of driving such birds as bluebirds from nest cavities also creates hostile feelings.

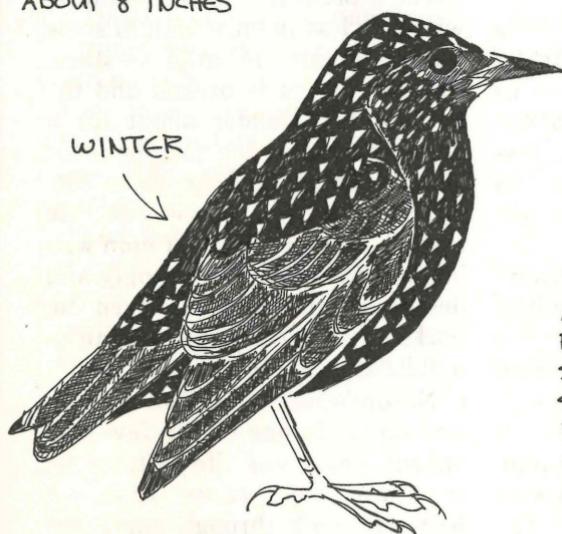
For all this, the starling has some good points. They are, as mentioned above, rather handsome birds and the sight of a flock of thousands of these birds going to a roost is indeed a spectacular sight. Most important however is the value of these birds in eating numerous insect pests that are also European or Asian in origin. Such pests as Japanese beetles, gypsy moth, and several other caterpillars are readily eaten by these birds whereas our native birds for the most part ignore these alien insects.

Take a close look at the starling when he visits your feeder this winter and note the plumage change through the year as shown in the illustration. They are here to stay.

*By R. Dewire*

*ILLUSTRATION BY MONICA RUSSO*

# THE STARLING



THE TECHNICAL NAME OF THE STARLING IS STURNUS VULGARIS — VULGARIS MEANS "COMMON", AND THAT'S WHAT THE STARLING IS INDEED. IMPORTED TO THE U.S. FROM EUROPE IN THE LATE 1890'S, THIS BIRD HAS INCREASED IN NUMBERS SO THAT IN SOME AREAS IT IS QUITE A NUISANCE.

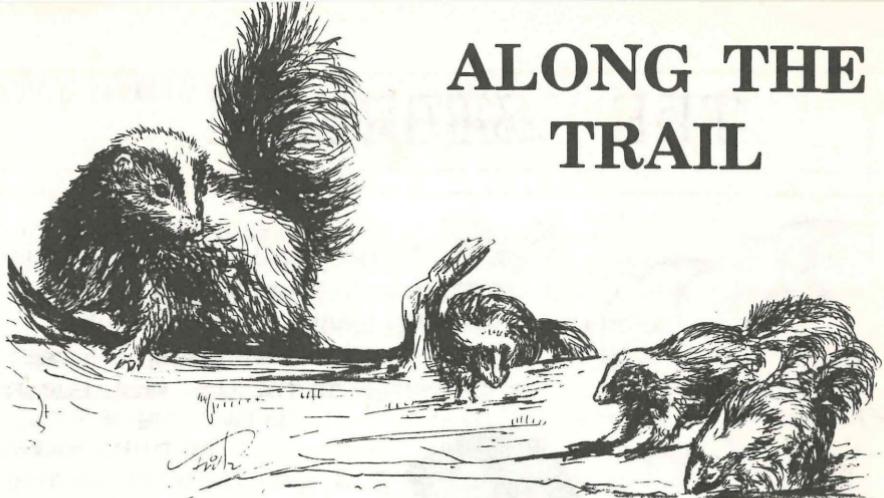
STARLINGS NEST EVERYWHERE — IN TREE HOLES, IN HOUSES, CHURCHES, + OTHER BUILDINGS, AND IN BIRD BOXES. THEIR EGGS ARE GREEN-BLUE.

THE STARLING HAS NO REAL SONG: HE JUST WHISTLES, CHATTERS, WHEEZES, AND MIMICS OTHER BIRDS. (HE IS RELATED TO MYNAH BIRDS).

IMMATURE STARLINGS ARE GRAYISH BROWN. IN THE SUMMER, STARLINGS ARE IRIDESCENT BLACK WITH A YELLOW BILL. WINTER PLUMAGE SHOWS WHITE SPECKLES — THE "LITTLE STARS" WHICH "STARLING" PROBABLY MEANS. NOTE DARK BILL IN WINTER.

FOOD: INSECTS, BUT MAY DEVOUR FRUIT CROPS.

# ALONG THE TRAIL



Don't you love the autumn? It is the season of crisp, invigorating days, of skies with big, billowy, white clouds so excitingly beautiful, and nights made unforgettable by the enchantment of a big, silvery moon. Studies and observations have shown that migrating birds can be counted with binoculars or a telescope as they fly across the face of the moon. On clear, fall nights, I have often counted about a hundred birds an hour crossing the full moon.

Autumn is the season of bonfires and the smell of burning leaves. It is a traditional part of the coming of the fall. Most of us have no other way to dispose of our leaves. Burning of leaves is, none-the-less, just another way in which we carelessly deplete our natural resources.

More delightful to the real country folks is the smell of a skunk on a cool, fall evening. There are many persons who LIKE the smell of a skunk.

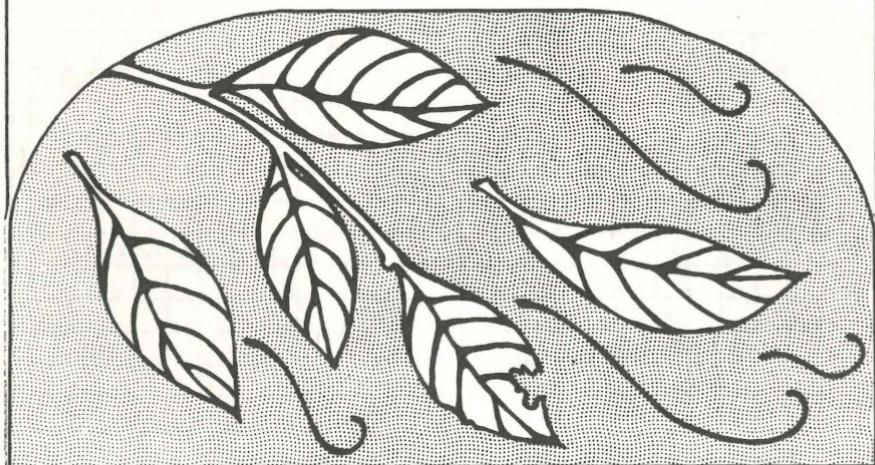
The skunk has no fear of man or other animals, and when unmolested goes about his business with utmost calm and dignity. The powerful odor is used as a means

of self-protection when suddenly alarmed. The animal would rather not use it, and keeps himself as clean as possible. A skunk usually has no more odor than a dog. The musky secretion is strongest when diluted. I once had four young skunks in a box with run attached. With heavy gloves I took one out of the box. I did not know that he had sprayed my glove until a man a hundred yards away yelled at me. A little disinfectant in wash water removes the scent quite readily.

The hibernation of the skunk in winter is less intense than in some other animals. In mild weather, the rest period is broken and the animal will wander about for a day or two. The den may be in an old woodchuck hole, under an out-building, or in a stone wall. He thrives near the abode of man who has increased his food supply and destroyed his enemies. Even so, packs of roving dogs and the automobile kill a great many of them.

Nature's way of things goes on and on. It is one of the few consistent phases of life left for us in these topsy-turvy days. A leisurely walk through our Sanctuary can be delightful.

# THE NATURALIST'S ALMANAC



by Trudy and John Gardner

## **Martinmas—Feast of St. Martin Monday - November 11th**

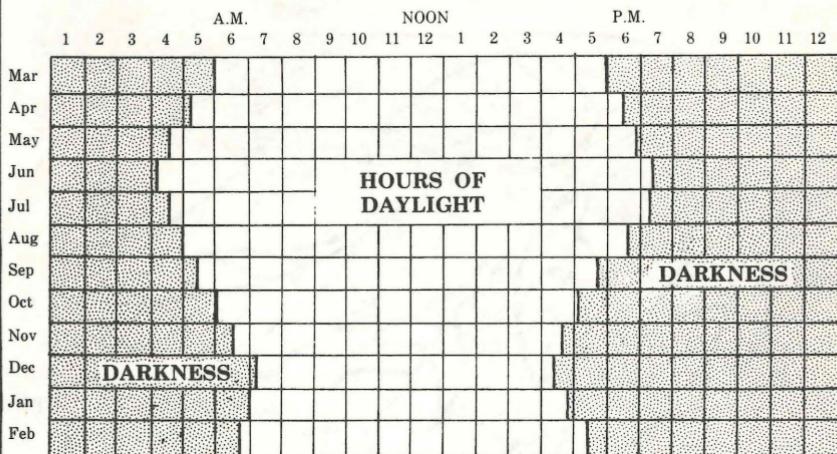
There is an old saying concerning the weather for the coming year. It is one of many that have been handed down from generation thru generation. Many of the young people tend to ignore or laugh at these old sayings but they have a bit of truth in them and sometimes prove to be quite correct. The saying about Martinmas—The Feast of St. Martin is such a saying. It goes like this:

*If the days be bright and sunny on Saint Martins day, or if the trees and vines retain their foliage still, then look for mild wintertime. . . . But lo, if there be frost before Martinmas then a cold and bitter winter comes to pass.*

Watch the sky, inspect the trees and vines, feel the frost, watch the weather signs and make your prediction. Right or Wrong—in six weeks you'll have your answer.

# Daylight and Darkness

The hours of daylight and darkness at Mystic, Connecticut.



## The Gardener's Guide

Bank the sides of your cold frame with soil, old hay, straw, or leaves to act as insulation. Watch the temperature and open the top as necessary to prevent overheating—yes overheating.

Remove any matted leaves on the lawn before winter really sets in. If you don't the grass will be dead where they are left, come next spring.

It's a good time to check garden labels. Replace those that are missing, re-write the faded. Otherwise you may forget what you have by spring.

When the heat is started in the house—even though it is only 68° the ferns and other plants will suffer. Be sure to keep them away from direct heat. The sudden dryness of the house must also be offset by an occasional spraying of the foliage or in some cases a good bath or shower.

## November's Sky

Mercury, Mars and Saturn are all morning planets this month. Remember that the Sun will be coming up later and later each day until the end of the month. It comes up at almost 7:00 (6:52 a.m. to be exact) which means you have a better chance of seeing those planets.

Likewise the sun will be setting much earlier—like 4:21 p.m. which makes star gazing a real wintertime activity for the whole family. A good time to look for the circumpolar stars, Orion, Andromeda, and Gemini.

The full moon is on the 29th, with the new moon on the 13th.

Venus is a morning planet until the 6th and as you expect an evening planet after that.

## Bird Feeder Time

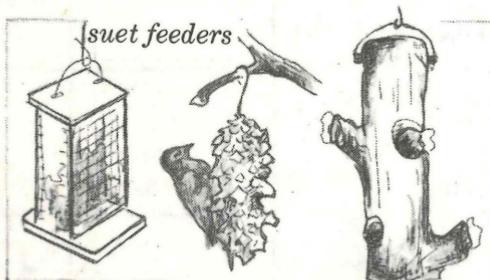
If you have not already done so then it is time to get your bird feeding station started. This will be an especially hard year for the birds—they are going to feel the pinch of inflation—just like the rest of us.

Seed prices for the coming season have been announced and it looks like the price of birdseed is going to go up a good thirty to forty percent. It has to do with the summer drought and early frost, general bad conditions, increased costs of shipping, mixing, processing, bagging, etc. etc. etc. The very same things you hear are making the cost of your food go up.

Here are some simple feeders you can set up in your yard for the winter season.

And remember birds like stale donuts, stale bread, fat trimmings from pork and beef, bacon drippings mixed with seed, stale crackers, and a host of other things found around the house—but naturally they love sunflower and mixed seed.

P.S. The Nature Center's Junior Staff are offering sunflower and mixed seed in quantity bags at what are called excellent prices, because they are—especially for members. Buy your seed from the Junior Staff and you help the birds, the kids and the Center.



for November  
the weatherman says . . .

1-3, **Unsettled time.** Unsettled, scattered showers in east. Clearing in west and across plains, showers in southwest.

4-7, **Fair spell.** Fair in central and eastern states. Pleasant in west becoming stormy in Utah-Colorado area and across plains states. Cooler in California and on south plateau.

8-11, **Storm period.** Squalls in Texas and southeast up through mid-Atlantic states, clearing. Severe storms move through central states eastward to New England, some snow.

12-15, **Variable weather.** Fair, cold winds from Atlantic as far west as Dakotas-Nebraska area. Pleasant in west then unsettled, light snow across plains states. Some snow from Nevada to west Texas.

16-19, **Fair time.** Clearing on southern plains, fair, cold. Becoming milder in far west then stormy. Unsettled in Mississippi Valley and east, snow, clearing, cold. Showers in Louisiana and southeast, clear.

20-23, **Stormy period.** Storms out of southwest dump snow up through Great Lakes area. Fair in northeast then stormy, some snow. Snow storms in Montana-Idaho area across plains states, rain in southeast.

24-27, **Fair time.** Fair mid-Atlantic states westward through central and western states, cold in southwest, unsettled, mild, far west. Colder in southland.

28-30, **Unsettled spell.** Some rain in Mississippi Valley and east. Clearing in central and western states.

Both precipitation and temperatures normal for month.

## NATURE'S



Sumac  
berries  
relished  
by birds

3

4

10

11

Trees are leafless  
... look for nests

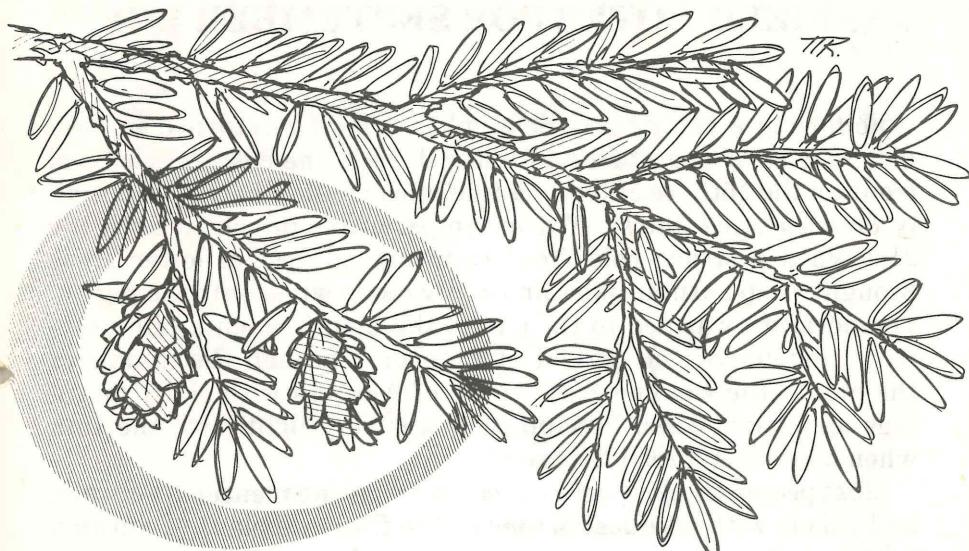
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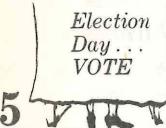
Bayberries covered  
with gray clusters  
... make Holiday  
candles

24

25



# CALENDAR—NOVEMBER 1974

1	 The wind whistles down from the north signaling the arrival of winter with each blast....		1	 Cattails Fly... white wooly seeds
5	 Election Day... VOTE	6	 Racoons stay at home and sleep away the day	9
12	 Listen-ruffed grouse drumming in the woods	13	 Towhees coming to feeders	16
19	 Snakes all in dens... hibernating	20	 Night herons along riverbanks... feeding on killifish	23
26	 Full Beaver Moon	27	 Thanksgiving Day	29
28				 30

## FIELD NOTES FOR SEPTEMBER 1974

Following a rainy early September, summer returned in mid-month with temperatures on many days in the 80's. A brief cool front on the 15th, resulted in a fine movement of hawks, especially *broad-winged hawks*. Warm temperatures prevailed until the 21st when a strong cold front resulting in frost in lower areas brought crisp autumn skies and chilly north winds into the region. Temperature warmed to the end of the month when a rainy cold front announced the arrival of October. Through the middle of the month the weather was typical of Autumn with chilly mornings and warm days. Precipitation was very light until the 16th when a low overspread the area.

Most people think of colored leaves when one mentions autumn, and this is without question one of the finest displays of autumn foliage to be seen in many years. The color in this area peaked around the 11th of October. Particularly impressive were the *red maples* and *black birch*. Plants have also made this an excellent year for seed and berry crops. *Oaks* and *hickories* are having a bumper crop of acorns and nuts this year and many others are common also. *Winterberry*, *viburnum*, *autumn olive* and *poke-weed* were among the heavy berry bearers.

With the exception of the hawks, there was virtually no sizeable landbird migration during September. Hawk movements were excellent on Sept. 15, 23, 24, 29, 30, Oct. 1, 2, and 3. *Broad-winged hawks* dominated early flights while *sharp-shinned hawks* were most common later. All days included *kestrels*, *ospreys*, *red-tailed hawks*, and occasional *Cooper's* and *marsh hawks*. Although the landbirds were later than normal, when they arrived the week of October 1st, the waves were very large. *Warblers* were numerous with all the regular species having been seen throughout the area. Sparrows also were abundant with such unusual species as *white-crowned* and *Lincoln's sparrow* seen in several locations. Waterfowl were beginning to arrive at this writing with reports of *pintails*, *baldpate*, and a few *shovelers* having been received. In summary the migration was excellent although late and combined with the spectacular fall colors made for a pleasant fall for anyone who enjoys nature.



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Olin Sewall Pettingill

**November 24, 1974 —**

**“Hawaii—Paradise of the  
Pacific,”** Walter H. Berlet

**January 26, 1975 —**

**Florida’s Cypress Sanctuary  
Fisheating Creek**

Richard Kern

**\*March 2, 1975 —**

**“Central California’s Coastal  
Plain,”** Eben McMillan

**March 23, 1975 —**

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Walter J. Breckenridge

\*This film will be held at Palmer Auditorium

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NEW LONDON, CONN. 06320

ADDRESS CORRECTION REQUESTED

## We Need Your Active Membership and Support

THAMES SCIENCE CENTER  
GALLOWS LANE, NEW LONDON, CONN. 06320  
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